

## **The Conversion of Non-Jews to Messianic Judaism: A Test-Case of Membership and Identity in a New Religious Movement**

*Conversion of Non-Jews to Messianic Judaism: Test-Case of Membership and Identity in a New Religious Movement” assesses the policy and practice of conversion in Messianic Judaism. Using surveys, interviews and publications it critically investigates the theological, anthropological and social-psychological issues, discussing the implications for individual converts, Messianic Judaism, and the wider Jewish community.*

### **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The topic of conversion to Judaism is of great significance in discussion of Jewish identity.

Conversion, the process by which non-Jews become Jews, has always occupied an important place on the Jewish agenda. From a theoretical standpoint, conversion is a fascinating phenomenon in many respects: religious and national, historical and social, philosophical and psychological. From a practical standpoint, conversion is an important social institution that is vital for Jewish continuity. Jewish attitudes toward conversion have evolved over the generations, reflecting the changing circumstances and needs of the Jewish collective.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on conversion and the issues surrounding it is also of particular interest in the movement of Jewish believers in Jesus known as “Messianic Judaism”. Dan Cohn-Sherbok states:

From ancient times to the present, conversion to Judaism has been viewed as an acceptable means of joining the Jewish people. During the Hellenistic period, Jews actively sought converts. Subsequently with the rise of Christianity, such missionary outreach ceased. Yet, through the centuries it has remained possible for non-Jews to enter into the Jewish fold. In modern times, the different branches of Judaism developed a variety of procedures for conversion. Paradoxically, however, Messianic Judaism has not formulated a process of conversion, and such reluctance has contributed to its isolation from the Jewish community as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the World Union of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, July 28<sup>th</sup> 2013. Audio presentation and Powerpoint slides available at Richard Harvey, “Conversion of Non-Jews to Messianic Judaism: Membership and Identity Issues,” n.p. [cited 30 September 2014]. Online: <http://blog.mappingmessianicjewishtheology.eu/search/wujs> .

<sup>2</sup> Yedidia Z. Stern, “From Ruth to Natasha: On the Future of Conversion in Israel” (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2010), 1. [Cited June 2013]. Online: <https://www.idi.org.il/media/932136/From%20Ruth%20to%20Natasha.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Professor Dan Cohn-Sherbok, email message to author, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

Messianic Judaism has been variously described as a sect, cult or heresy.<sup>4</sup> The approach of this paper is to locate it as a new religious movement intersecting the boundaries of Judaism and Christianity, and to identify the question of conversion of non-Jews as a means of understanding the self-identity of the movement as it situates itself between the two religious communities. The question to be addressed is to what extent the phenomenon of Messianic Jewish Conversion (MJC), or conversion to Judaism through the Messianic movement, contributes to our understanding of Messianic Judaism itself as a modern day revitalization of the Jewish Christianity that emerged within Second Temple Judaism.<sup>5</sup>

#### a. Background of Modern Messianic Judaism<sup>6</sup>

The movement of Jewish believers in Jesus known as “Messianic Judaism” emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s from its roots in the Hebrew Christian movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, strongly influenced by Protestant Evangelical Missions to the Jewish people. Establishing itself in Israel and Diaspora (particularly in the USA), it has formed congregations and synagogues, schools, training institutions and national and international organisations. Yet despite its numerical and institutional growth, there is no agreement on the means by which non-Jews might be admitted to the movement, nor whether a process of *giyyur* should be available to would-be converts.<sup>7</sup>

#### b. Definition of Terms

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<sup>4</sup> Sobel, B. Zvi, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974); Berger, David and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and 'Jewish Christianity'* (New York: Ktav, 1978); Rausch, David A., *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce H. Stokes, 'Messianic Judaism: Ethnicity in Revitalization' (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Standard introductions to Messianic Judaism now available include: Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2009); David J. Rudolph and Joel Willetts (eds.), *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Context and Biblical Foundations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013; Hanna Rucks, *Messianische Juden: Geschichte und Theologie der Bewegung in Israel* (Neukirchener Theologie: Gottingen, 2014). David Rudolph's website provides a comprehensive listing of resources at <http://www.me> David Rudolph, "What are the Best Books on Messianic Jews and Messianic Judaism?" n.p. [cited 30 September 2014]. Online: <http://www.messianicjudaism.net/>.

<sup>7</sup> The terms *giyyur* and 'conversion', despite the important differences in meaning they convey, are used interchangeably throughout this paper. See Avi Sagai and Zvi Zohar, *Transforming Identity: The Ritual Transformation from Gentile to Jew – Structure and Meaning* (London, UK: Continuum, 2007), 3-4; David J. Rudolph, "Messianic Jews and Christian Theology: Restoring an Historical Voice to the Contemporary Discussion," *Pro Ecclesia* 24 (2005): 58-84.

Whilst orthodox *halacha* defines a Jew as the child of a Jewish mother or a convert to Judaism, for the purposes of this paper the Reform definition which accepts both patrilineal and matrilineal descent is adopted, as this is also the most common understanding found in the Messianic movement.<sup>8</sup> A Messianic Jew is defined as a Jewish person who accepts Yeshua (Jesus) as Messiah.<sup>9</sup> Messianic Judaism is understood according to the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations definition of 2005:

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) envisions Messianic Judaism as a movement of Jewish congregations and groups committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant. Messianic Jewish groups may also include those from non-Jewish backgrounds who have a confirmed call to participate fully in the life and destiny of the Jewish people. We are committed to embodying this definition in our constituent congregations and in our shared institutions.<sup>10</sup>

c. Conversion to Judaism or Messianic Judaism?

Rich Nichol, a leading proponent of MJC, asks the question: "Is conversion of Gentiles conversion to Messianic Judaism or to Judaism?" His answer is:

More than semantics are involved here. As a Judaism we convert to Judaism. A Reform or Conservative rabbi does not convert Gentiles to their specific denomination, but to Judaism. It should be the same among us. So, when the hospital attendant asks one of our converts, "what is your religion?" The natural and appropriate answer is, "Judaism."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, *Mapping*, p.2 fn.6, "For the purposes of the present study the a child of Jewish parents or a convert to Judaism is considered Jewish, following Reform Judaism, and the majority of the Messianic movement." The term 'Gentile' is also problematic, but for our purposes is taken to mean someone who is not Jewish through matrilineal or patrilineal descent, and has not undergone a conversion process.

<sup>9</sup> Whilst all Jews are in some sense "Messianic" and there have been many Messianic claimants in Judaism, the term is restricted here to that particular form of Jewish Messianism that accepts the Messiahship of Jesus (Harvey, *Mapping*, p.1 fn.2). Other terms such as Jewish believers, Jesus-believing Jews are also used. For nomenclature see Harvey, *Mapping*, 8-12. For a fuller statement of the beliefs of Messianic Judaism see the 2012 UMJC Statement of Faith "Standards for Messianic Jewish Congregations and Chavurot" at <http://umjc.org/faith-and-values/statement-of-faith> [cited 20 June 2013].

<sup>10</sup> UMJC, "Defining Messianic Judaism" <http://www.umjc.org/faith-and-values/defining-messianic-judaism>. N.p.[cited June 2013].

<sup>11</sup> Rich Nichol, "The Case for Conversion: Welcoming Non-Jews into Messianic Jewish Space" <http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/The-Case-for-Conversion-Welcoming-Non-Jews-into-Messianic-Jewish-Space>, p.18

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, we understand that MJC takes place within a Messianic Jewish frame of reference which assumes, accepts and indeed requires faith in Yeshua as Messiah in addition to fulfilling the other requirements necessary. This form of conversion to Judaism therefore is distinctive from conversion to Orthodox, Reform, Conservative or other conversion models.

d. Numbers of Messianic Jews

i. Israel.

There are few reliable surveys of Jewish believers in Jesus. The survey conducted by Kai Kjaer-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt estimated 4,785 Messianic Jews in 81 congregations in Israel in 1999.<sup>12</sup> This figure has now been revised upwards, and Akiva Cohen states:

Currently there are about one hundred and twenty Messianic Jewish congregations and small groups in Israel, with a conservative estimate of approximately ten thousand self-identified Messianic Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Cohen adds in a footnote that this number is problematic, as those who are children from mixed marriages and do not fit the halachic criterion of matrilineal descent make up a large part of this group. Some would “place the number of ethnic Messianic Jews at less than three thousand.”<sup>14</sup> Cohen refers to “unofficial estimates” of the current makeup of the Messianic Jewish community in Israel:

10 percent Sabras, 55 percent Russians, 5 to 7 percent Ethiopians, at least 25 percent English, French, Spanish and German immigrants; and 3 to 5 percent expatriates.<sup>15</sup>

ii. USA

Estimates for the numbers of Jesus-believing Jews in the USA vary considerably. In 2003 it was estimated that there were between 30,000-75,000, but higher

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<sup>12</sup> Kjaer-Hansen, Kai and Bodil F. Skjøtt, *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (Jerusalem: United Christian Council in Israel/Caspari Centre for Biblical and Jewish Studies, [Mishkan Double Issue 30-31]), 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Akiva Cohen, “Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (ed. David J., Rudolph and Joel Willetts: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews”, 109, fn. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110, fn 22.

estimates are often given.<sup>16</sup> Dr Barry Kosmin, co-director of the 1990 and 2001 American Jewish Identity Surveys<sup>17</sup> (AJIS) states:

The number of Messianic Jews/ Jews for Jesus etc. is estimated in most surveys as around 20-30,000 adults. Most of them are switchers out of Judaism. Due to small samples and fudgy definitions, statistics on this topic are difficult to obtain and open to large standard errors – so caveat emptor.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst not including Messianic Jews as a separate category, the AJIS survey identified 2.3 million “Jews of other religions” who

had two Jewish parents and were born and raised as “core Jews,” but have switched to a non-Jewish religious group. Thus the “other religions” reported include the whole gamut from Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian to Messianic Jews as well as other religions such as Buddhism, Wicca, Scientology and Unitarianism.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that the number of Jewish believers in Jesus is much larger than those who are directly associated with Messianic congregations. According to David Rudolph:

There are presently over one million Christians in the United States who have a Jewish parent. We do not know how many of these Christians of Jewish descent attend churches; however, there is little question that the number is in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>20</sup>

Figures compiled recently by the World Christian Database give a lower estimate of 154,810, based on responses from 21 national and international organisations.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Perlman, “Statistically Speaking: What's New in Jewish Community Demographics?” in *Chavurah* volume 6/1 (February 2003): 4-5. Cited 30 September 2014. Online:

<http://www.jewsforjesus.org/files/pdf/havurah/havurah-06-01.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Egon Mayer, Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Jewish Identity Survey 2001 AJIS Report: An Exploration In The Demography And Outlook Of A People 2001* (New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, rev. ed. 2003). JOR (Jewish Other Religion) 1,470,000 and JCOR (Jewish children of other religion) 880,000 make up 31% of total 7,690,000 in the 2001 survey.

<sup>18</sup> Barry Kosmin, email communication, 22 June 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Kosmin, *Jewish Identity Survey*, 2003, p.20-21.

<sup>20</sup> David J. Rudolph, *Growing Your Olive Tree Marriage* (Clarksville: Lederer, 2003), 180 fn. 2. Jewish demographic surveys routinely exclude Messianic Jews from their reports. Cf. <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Archive/C-NY-New-York-2011-Screener.pdf> where respondents who identify as “Messianic Jews” or “Jews for Jesus” are not included.

<sup>21</sup> Gina Bellofatto, Researcher at World Christian Database (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon Conwell College),

### iii. Europe

According to the research of Sergio DellaPergola, the European Jewish population can be estimated at 1,455,900 in 2010.<sup>22</sup> According to a recent survey conducted by this author, an estimated 25,000 Messianic Jews are found mainly in the United Kingdom (5,000) and Germany (10,000), Russia (5000) and Ukraine (5000).<sup>23</sup>

#### e. Non-Jews in Messianic Congregations

According to some estimates, between 50-80% of members and attenders of Messianic congregations in the USA are not themselves Jewish. Whilst Gentiles are welcomed in most Messianic groups, their presence and role is problematic. Rudolph and Klayman state:<sup>24</sup>

The demographic reality of Messianic Gentiles, including a second and third generation, raises a number of questions that the Messianic Jewish community is currently engaging. Many of these questions relate to time-honoured traditions in the Jewish world concerning the participation of non-Jews in Jewish life.<sup>25</sup>

Daniel Juster writes:

Today we face a new phenomenon. It is that the majority of our congregations are no longer congregations with majority Jewish membership. While we always expected gentiles to join us, we fathers of the movement expected that our efforts to reach our people would be successful and that a majority Jewish constituency would ensue in most of our congregations. This new reality has come as a surprise. The majority of Jews in Messianic Congregations are now in congregations with a

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<http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/Center-for-the-Study-of-Global-Christianity.cfm/>, email to author, 20 June 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Sergio DellaPergola, *World Jewish Population, 2010* (North American Jewish Data Bank Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life, University of Connecticut, 2010) ([www.jewishdatabank.org](http://www.jewishdatabank.org)), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Harvey, "Foundations of European Messianic Jewish Theology," n.p. [cited 20 June 2013]. Online:

[http://www.messianicsymposium.eu/EMTS\\_papers/2013EMTSrhpaper.pdf](http://www.messianicsymposium.eu/EMTS_papers/2013EMTSrhpaper.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Rich Nichol, "The Unique Place of Gentiles in Messianic Congregational Life" and Jeff Adler, "Gentiles Within the Messianic Jewish Community," (paper presented at the Borough Park Symposium 2012), n.p. [cited 20 June 2013]. Online:

<http://www.mjstudies.com/storage/Nichol%20Gentiles%20in%20the%20MJ%20Congregation%20Draft%201%20-%20Final.doc>.

<sup>25</sup> David Rudolph and Elliott Klayman. "Messianic Jewish Synagogues" in Rudolph and Willetts, *Introduction*, 48.

majority of gentiles. I speak of America here, for the situation in Israel is not at all like this.<sup>26</sup>

Bruce Stokes, an anthropologist and non-Jewish participant in the movement, claims:

My dissertation ... addresses early thinking on conversion and absorption in the movement. Since that time the issue has become much more of a discussion point among many in the movement.<sup>27</sup>

Mitch Glaser similarly reflects on how the movement is concerned with this question:

There is a growing discussion within the Messianic Jewish national Organisations about the degree to which Gentile believers in Yeshua should be allowed to participate in traditional Jewish observance (e.g. bar/bat mitzvah) and what the role of non-Jews should be in Messianic synagogue life. There are some within the Messianic Jewish national organizations who are calling for their groups to recognize Jews by choice who have undergone a formal conversion process, either Messianic or traditional.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, interest in the topic is not uniform, and appears largely as a diaspora phenomenon. One Israeli questionnaire respondent states:

You will know that this is definitely a non-issue in Israel. Conversion to Messianic Judaism presupposes a level of organization and structure that is not present in the Israeli Messianic Jewish movement at this time. The very notion of "conversion to Messianic Judaism" would raise the hackles of most of the congregational leadership in the country. Given the theological leanings of the community here, it is an untenable concept.<sup>29</sup>

#### f. Limitations

It is beyond the purposes of this paper to compare and discuss Messianic Jewish conversion in the light of conversion processes in other forms of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, etc). Rather our aim will be to set the discussion of MJC within Messianic Judaism, where it is a controversial issue. Similarly the question of the acceptance of Messianic Judaism by other

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel C. Juster, "Jewish and Gentile Distinction in Messianic Congregations" (paper presented at the Tikkun Leadership Conference, 2008), unpublished.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Stokes, email correspondence, May 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Mitch Glaser, "Messianic Jewish National Organizations" in Rudolph and Willetts, *Introduction*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Respondent 32. However, a minority of Israeli respondents would disagree.

forms of Judaism and Christianity will not be discussed, except where this is significant for the intra-Messianic Jewish discourse on the topic that arises from discussion of MJC.

## 2. Discussion of Conversion within the Messianic movement

Whilst academic studies of conversion of Gentiles to Messianic Judaism have not appeared prior to this study, discussion has taken place in several forums within the Messianic movement.<sup>30</sup> In 1983 the Union of Messianic Congregations (UMJC) in the USA decided not to recognize conversions of Gentiles within Messianic Judaism, although a minority of its member congregations<sup>31</sup> did recognize such conversions. In 2004 the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), a group of 26 leaders, developed and implemented a formal conversion process. A range of papers in the UMJC journal *Kesher* discussed the views not only of UMJC leaders but those from other Messianic Jewish organizations, Church leaders and Rabbis from the wider Jewish community.<sup>32</sup>

The UMJC Executive Committee issued the following statement:

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) was created in 1979 as a broad based organization of Messianic Jewish congregations, willing to entertain and confront important issues. One such issue is the role of Gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations and whether, in certain limited situations, Gentiles can be formally converted to Messianic Judaism. In 1983, the UMJC examined this question and issued a position paper containing two views (available at [www.umjc.org](http://www.umjc.org)). The majority position opposed Gentile conversion; the minority supported it. Hence, since 1983 the UMJC does not recognize conversion of Gentiles within Messianic Judaism. It does, however, include under its umbrella some groups that do recognize such conversion.

Recently, a group of leaders affiliated with the UMJC developed and began to implement a formal conversion process for Gentiles within their local congregations. The UMJC does not endorse or recognize this process. Yet, the UMJC Executive Committee recognizes the importance of our founding mandate, "To provide a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish Congregations." We will continue to provide for dialogue on this issue and its theological and practical

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<sup>30</sup> One exception is Alan Campbell, "The *Non-Conversions* of Jews and Gentiles to Messianic Judaism: A Sense-Making Analysis of Interpersonal and Mass Communicative Influence on Spiritual Transformations" (Ph.D. diss., School of Communication and the Arts, Regent University, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Approximately 10%, by show of hands of voting delegates.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Sparks (ed.) *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism* Issue 19 - Summer 2005 (Online: <http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/View-issue>).

ramifications, including coverage in our professional journal, *Kesher*. In the midst of our diversity, we affirm our unity in Messiah Yeshua and in our vision for the Messianic Jewish congregational movement.<sup>33</sup>

The *Kesher* issue contained the essay written by Rabbi Rich Nichol advocating conversion<sup>34</sup>, diverse responses, and two book reviews. Nichol advocates for a conversion process which is:

- made available in a very limited way, primarily to those Gentiles who have Jewish spouses, but also to some others under very specific circumstances (and not presented as the norm for Gentiles who embrace Jesus as the Messiah...)
- is undergirded by halachic standards by which the new convert is expected to live
- can help to elevate Messianic Judaism in our own eyes, in the eyes of our children and in the eyes of a watching world. A nation with no boundaries will not be a viable nation for long. Messianic Judaism will not grow to become a vital, worthy expression of Jewish peoplehood without ameliorating this situation. It is a matter of survival and it is a matter of integrity.<sup>35</sup>

Nichol builds his argument further in his 2012 Borough Park Symposium Paper, where he appeals to the bilateral ecclesiology model of Mark Kinzer, the work of post-supersessionist Methodist theologian R Kendal Soulen, and the Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod.<sup>36</sup> Before calling for a conversion process as a necessary step in the validation of Messianic Judaism as a Judaism *sui generis* he states:

the fact of Jewish and Gentile identity cannot be effaced. The *ineluctable character of these dimensions of human identity* [emphasis his] attests to the depth and resolution of God's consummating engagement with creation. As the Redeemer, of Israel God acts in fidelity not only to Israel,

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<sup>33</sup> Jamie Cowan, "Dear Reader" (Introduction to *Kesher* Issue 19), online: <http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/Dear-Reader>.

<sup>34</sup> Richard C Nichol, "The Case for Conversion: Welcoming Non-Jews into Messianic Jewish Space" (<http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/The-Case-for-Conversion-Welcoming-Non-Jews-into-Messianic-Jewish-Space>). See also a shorter version of this paper at Rich Nichol, "The Unique Place of Gentiles in Messianic Jewish Congregational Life" (paper presented at the Borough Park Symposium 2012), <http://boroparksymposium.com/papers> (accessed June 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Nichol, "The Case for Conversion", n.p.

<sup>36</sup> Soulen, R. Kendall, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People Israel* (2nd ed. Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996); Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/Brazos, 2005).

but to the totality of the human family's created and covenantal identity.  
(Soulen 154-155)

Nichol proposes that at the core of Messianic Judaism's self-definition and communal formation should be the organic connection between Judaism and Christianity as two faiths. This results in the realisation that "Christianity is acculturated (Jewish) messianism for the nations."<sup>37</sup>

Nichol distinguishes between what he calls the "Missiological Approach (MA)" and the "Bilateral Approach (BA)", arguing that the two orientations "create overarching value systems which are communicated powerfully in myriad ways in our interactions with one another and with congregants".<sup>38</sup> As a Bilateral Approach practitioner, he favours the approach tends to "gravitate more to a traditional Jewish than an Evangelical Christian starting point" for congregational life.<sup>39</sup> Because the "BA congregation is a unique kind of synagogue and not a culturally attuned church" it is appropriate that its self-identification is primarily Jewish and it "must be made up primarily of Jews".<sup>40</sup> Nichol recognises that whilst not all Gentiles attending a BA Congregation will wish to convert to Judaism, and there will continue to be a role for them *as Gentiles*, similar to that of Gentiles attracted to mainstream synagogues, the Conversion option should be clearly available to some for whom it would be appropriate.

Responses to Nichol's paper from Michael Wolf, Jeffrey Feinberg, John Fischer, Kay Silberling from within the Messianic movement and outside observers Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Douglas Harink provided a variety of responses, from Michael Wolf's "absolutely not!" to John Fischer's "the time has come".<sup>41</sup>

Michael Wolf, representing the position of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America and the Steering Committee of the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations, argues against a conversion process.<sup>42</sup> According to Wolf, a conversion of Gentiles does not "conform to scripture" as "the clear and consistent pattern of the New Covenant is to help God-fearing Gentiles to find their identity as fellow heirs with their Jewish brethren in Messiah" *without*

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<sup>37</sup> Nichol, "Unique Place," 17.

<sup>38</sup> Nichol, "Unique Place", 5.

<sup>39</sup> Nichol, "Unique Place", 6.

<sup>40</sup> Nichol, "Unique Place", 19.

<sup>41</sup> See also John Fischer "The Legitimacy of Conversion," in *Voices of Messianic Judaism*, (Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., Baltimore:Lederer Books, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Wolf, "A Conviction Against Conversion", n.p. [cited 20 June 2013]. Online: <http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/A-Conviction-Against-Conversion>. The IAMCS is the largest grouping of Messianic Jewish Congregations, with 127 groups worldwide listed on the directory website at <http://www.iamcs.org/#/congregations-rabbis/iamcs-directory-pdf> (accessed June 2013).

converting to Judaism.<sup>43</sup> Conversion is “contrary to the principles and practice outlined in scripture”. The practice of Messianic Jewish conversion, contrary to Nichol’s assertion that it will help the Messianic movement become accepted within the wider Jewish community, “will be seen as the ultimate deception”.<sup>44</sup>

Another danger Wolf sees is that the wider Christian Church will see such a conversion process as damaging to the role of Messianic Judaism:

I believe that the impact of taking even a few born again Gentile believers and calling them Jewish will cause confusion about exactly who we are and what we are doing. We will be seen as developing into a sect. It does not matter whether we apply the process carefully or sparingly. Doing it at all is like being a little bit pregnant. And this will not be lost on the Christian families (and those families’ pastors) of the Gentile (or “former Gentile”) members of our congregations. The Gentile church will recognize that this is far afield from our original vision of calling our Jewish people to fulfill their spiritual destiny through a personal relationship with Yeshua HaMashiach.<sup>45</sup>

Admitting the practice of conversion would “prove extremely divisive, splitting the congregation into more classes”, with half the non-Jews in the congregation lining up to become converts, and the others would refuse, seeing the practice as non-Scriptural.

As regards the identity-designation for Gentiles within the Messianic Congregations, Wolf admits that there needs to be an option for someone who does not feel comfortable calling themselves “Christian” (because of the history of Christian anti-Judaism and the negative associations of the term), but an “unscriptural conversion process is not the answer” and this aspect of Messianic Jewish life has to be accepted and worked through creatively.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst some see the introduction of a conversion process into the Messianic movement as necessary and inevitable, Wolf states the official position of the largest organisation of Messianic congregations as firmly against such a move. “God does not change, scripture does not change, and our stand on this issue will not change either”.<sup>47</sup>

Jeffrey Feinberg reflects the majority position within the UMJC, arguing that there is no formal conversion process in the Torah of the Hebrew Bible, and Messianic Jews should not depend on later rabbinic Judaism for a normative process. The evidence cited by Nichol for a conversion process in the Brit

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<sup>43</sup> Wolf, “Conviction”. For the same material see Michael Wolf, ‘Conversion of Gentiles—No Way’ in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Voices of Messianic Judaism* (Lederer, 2001), 137-138.

<sup>44</sup> Wolf, “Conviction”, *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Wolf, “Conviction,” 4.

<sup>46</sup> Wolf, “Conviction,” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Wolf, “Conviction,” 4.

Hadashah (New Testament) is misinterpreted by Nichol, who understands the circumcision of Timothy as that of a proselyte. Nichol states:

Shaye Cohen in his important work, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* argues that in the period before the codification of the Mishnah, Timothy would have been viewed as a Gentile and that his circumcision represented a formal conversion to Judaism. Matrilineal descent, according to Cohen, though the normative criteria for determining Jewish identity today, was not the standard in the time of Rav Shaul and Timothy.<sup>48</sup>

According to Feinberg, Paul already viewed Timothy as an ethnic Jew who needed to complete his religious obligations. Timothy's "conversion" should not there be seen as an example of a Gentile becoming a proselyte Jew. Feinberg sees no biblical precedent for converting Gentiles who have not been raised in a Jewish household.<sup>49</sup> Also, for Feinberg a formalized conversion process is "premature" at the international level, because the UMJC has yet to define "who is a Jew?"<sup>50</sup>

Recent discussion has reflected on Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7, and the different interpretive strategies on this passage reflect the competing positions on MJC held by Messianic leaders. David Rudolph disagrees with Nichol's reading of Shaye Cohen. He writes:<sup>51</sup>

During my doctoral work, it became clear to me that Paul's circumcision of Timothy, immediately after the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council decision, reflects Paul's view that Timothy was a Jew by matrilineal standards as Shaye Cohen argues. See *A Jew to the Jews*, 23-27. Thus, there is a biblical precedent for matrilineal based Jewish identity that I find compelling and this is not a precedent that necessarily undermines the patrilineal.<sup>52</sup>

In his paper in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* Rudolph lays out a biblical and theological framework for dealing with the question of conversion in light of Paul's rule in all the congregations (1 Cor. 7). Along with Michael Wyschogrod, he recognises Paul's continuing Torah observance and Paul's expectation that this would be continued by Jesus-believing Jews. As to the question of Gentile conversion to (Messianic) Judaism, he writes:

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<sup>48</sup> Nichol, 13, referring to Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Feinberg, "The Case for 'Defacto' Conversion: Building Messianic Jewish and Messianic Gentile Households", n.p. Cited 20 June 2013. Online: <http://www.kesherjournal.com/Issue-19/The-Case-for-Defacto-Conversion-Building-Messianic-Jewish-and-Messianic-Gentile-Households> .

<sup>50</sup> Feinberg, 'Case', *ibid*.

<sup>51</sup> David Rudolph, "Paul's "Rule in All the Churches" (1 Cor 7:17-24) and Torah-Defined Ecclesiological Variegation" in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* (Volume 5, Issue 1 2010 CP1-24), 17.

<sup>52</sup> David Rudolph, email correspondence with author, 10 May 2013.

What are the implications of my paper for conversion? It seems to me that Paul's rule is a general halakhic prohibition against conversion because of the New Covenant reality described in Acts 15, Gal 2, Eph 2, etc. Generally speaking, Yeshua-believing Gentiles should not become Jewish converts (i.e. Jews). This said, many halakhic prohibitions, including New Covenant ones (e.g. Yeshua's stance on divorce in Mark 10:10-12), have exceptions and the same may be the case with Paul's rule in all the churches (1 Cor 7:17-24). What exceptions might there be? I think a compelling case can be made for exceptions in the case of a Gentile married to a Jew who feels led by the Lord to embrace the Jewish people as Ruth did (Ruth 1:16). A direct result of conversion in this case is that the children typically have a more clear and unambiguous identity as Jews. A similar argument can be made with respect to Jews adopting Gentile children. Here the children take on Jewish identity and continue the line of their parents, passing on the covenant of their fathers to their children as in the case of Yarcha (1 Chr 2:34-35). There may be other exceptions for which a compelling case can be made on the basis of Scriptural principles. In the end, we are dealing with the need to uphold Paul's general halakhic prohibition against conversion. If the exceptions become the norm, we no longer have a rule. Therefore, my view is that exceptions need to be carefully weighed by wise and learned leaders in groups like the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), Tikken, etc.<sup>53</sup>

A further position is also expressed by Kay Silberling, who argues that Messianic Jewish conversion at present lacks authenticity, so should not take place when the Messianic movement lacks maturity, structure and stability.<sup>54</sup> Those who do convert will still find their position uncertain.

The fluidity surrounding Jewish identity makes for lively debates as to whether "Jewish" is a social, cultural, ethnic, racial, geographic, religious, or mythic category, or some combination of all of the above. It is very likely, then, that conversion will not alleviate the anxiety at all. It may actually increase the converts' social anxiety by heightening their sense of marginality vis-à-vis some perceived, monolithic, ontologically Jewish world that is, instead, a social construct and hence intangible and fluid. They may be expecting that, by undergoing conversion, they will join a cohesive group that has a clearly marked identity. Those converts, then, expecting to land on solid, secure ground, may instead find themselves thrust upon the waves of a stormy and blustery sea. While riding those waves may be exhilarating to others, it is not likely to comfort those who are seeking relief from social instability.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> David Rudolph, email correspondence with author, 10 May 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Kay Silberling, "The Notion of Conversion in Antiquity and Beyond", n.p., cited 20 May 2013, in Andrew Sparks (ed.). *Keshet: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*. Issue 19, Summer 2005. Online: <http://www.keshetjournal.com/Issue-19/The-Notion-of-Conversion-in-Antiquity-and-Beyond> .

<sup>55</sup> Silberling, *ibid*.

The Messianic movement itself is not a true Judaism, but a ‘judaized form of Protestant Christianity’.

Finally, Messianic Jews have yet to gain consensus and to articulate, as a movement, what it is that proselytes are converting from, and, even more importantly, what they are converting to. Despite protestations to the contrary, Messianic Judaism, as it is practiced in many regions of the world today, is not a Judaism. In many, if not most, cases, it is a judaized form of Protestant Christianity. The world to which many in the movement continue to gaze for their vision, their direction, and their theology is the world of late Twentieth Century Christian revivalism.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than practice conversion to Messianic Judaism, Silberling argues that

A more effective strategy would be for Messianic Jews to go about defining themselves in a purposefully ethical manner, without doing so in ways that can harm those who occupy the in-between spaces of their social and theological worlds. There are other ethical ways to resolve the tensions, such as encouraging conversion to Judaism through other avenues for those extremely rare cases in which the lack of a ceremony poses a singular hardship for individuals or for introducing liturgical practices that more fully enfranchise non-Jews *qua* non-Jews.<sup>57</sup>

For Silberling, then, “Messianic Jews would do well to create ethical and sensitive practices to enfranchise, educate, and embrace all the faithful, steadfast, non-Jewish Messianic believers in their midst.”<sup>58</sup> Whilst Silberling’s rationale will not appeal to others who oppose MJC, and Silberling herself may well be more tolerant of conversion of other forms of Judaism, she finds her views in agreement with those who oppose conversion for the contrary reasons, that the act of conversion is ‘too Jewish’ rather than ‘not Jewish enough.’

Such discussions reflect a variety of interpretive strategies and theological understandings which are representative of the different theological streams within the Messianic movement.<sup>59</sup> Such diversity of understandings are found not just in discussion of conversion but in relation to other controversial matters, such as Christology, Torah and the place of Israel.<sup>60</sup> Questions of identity and authority (of Scripture, Rabbinic tradition and Christian understanding) lie beneath such presenting issues, and have yet to be resolved. Before summarising these different positions, we will now give brief case studies of conversion from the converts’ perspective, focusing on the practice of conversion, and the findings of the questionnaire sent to Messianic leaders.

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<sup>56</sup> Silberling, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Silberling, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Silberling, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Harvey, MMJT conclusion for the 8 types of MJT.

<sup>60</sup> See Harvey, Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology, Conclusion.

### 3. Case studies

These case studies are given to indicate some of the varying motivations, circumstances and processes followed by those who have undergone some form of conversion with Messianic Judaism.<sup>61</sup>

#### A. Hannah – Conversion within the MJRC conversion process

Hannah was raised in a Christian home, with her own personal experience of faith in Jesus as her good shepherd and a constant source of love and caring. She brought up her three children as Christians, and used their family Bible study as a way to get to really know the family of “Jesus the Jewish Messiah”. Not satisfied with local churches in her area, she contacted a Messianic Jewish teacher. She learned how to celebrate the Passover in a Messianic Jewish context. The Rabbi invited her to help form a Messianic group starting up in her area and “Messianic Jewish life and study was now implanted in us”.

She asked the Messianic rabbi why she worshipped in this non-Christian way and he replied this was the life style and worship of our Messiah Yeshua. She found contentment in following this format.”

Hannah realised that now she was not really Christian any more and she was not Jewish. The Messianic rabbi explained her family were God fearers. This satisfied them for a while but they soon discovered they needed to be Jewish. They realizes this conversion was not and would not be accepted by the established Jewish Community, but it was their personal, compelling way of uniting themselves to Yeshua’s [Jewish] family. In the 1990s they took part in a conversion ceremony which was a very personal ritual between the most awesome God and his promised Messiah, Yeshua. Since then a a large portion of their lives has been involved in pursuit of their congregational goals.

Hannah decided to convert after a long period of individual and collective study, much self-reflection, prayer, and honest commitment to the Jewish God and Yeshua as his Messiah. Her conversion took place under the auspices of the MJRC, as her rabbi belongs to this group and has advocated publicly a conversion process for non-Jews.

She is very much in favour of a conversion process as it allows her “an avenue of worship to the God of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob as a Jew” as well as allowing her to make a public statement that she is identifying as a Jew. It affords her a way to “voluntarily unite with Jews thus feeling confident and a part of the blessing of Genesis 12:3.”

As a Torah-observing convert, she believes she must be “committed to the Jewish life style of the ‘Old Covenant’”. Conversion should take place under

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<sup>61</sup> Names and some details have been altered to preserve anonymity. Interviews were either given via email, in response to the questionnaire (see below) or, in the case of Sarah, from an online resource.

the auspices of a 'qualified leader'. In Hannah's case, her husband also converted, and she estimates 10% of her congregation are converts.

Whilst conversion is not a significant issue in the life of her congregation it has many implications, with relating to the greater Jewish Community, understanding of true identity. It affects the structure and societal norms of her congregation.

Hannah understands that her conversion will not be recognised by other Jewish groups, but would "still like to know why Messianic Jewish groups are not eligible to be included as another group in the Jewish community".

## **B. Baruch – Conversion within the MJRC Process**

Baruch had no connections to Judaism or any other religious upbringing. His faith in Jesus came in college, where he was immediately fascinated by the Jewishness of Jesus and struck at the lack of attention in the church he was in to the Jewishness of his Saviour.

He met a Jewish Christian in his church and learned all he could from them. He dropped out of college to visit Israel to learn more, and starting attending a Messianic Jewish congregation, studying Jewish history and culture, in addition to attending his church.

Baruch was "moving in a direction toward Judaism without giving up on Jesus". He spent more than ten years with missions to the Jewish people but became increasingly dissatisfied with their approach, realising that he was causing Jews to assimilate into Christian culture and lose their identity as Jews. He believed God's purpose for Jewish people included affiliation with the Jewish community, observance of Torah and tradition and passing these traditions on to future generations.

He left the Jewish mission agencies and started a Messianic Jewish congregation, affiliating to the UMJC, whose leaders mentored and taught him. He began to pursue rabbinical ordination, without realising that as a Gentile he should not seek to become a rabbi, as at that time it was still possible for a non-Jew to be ordained. Eventually his mentors asked him what he was doing, and urged him to complete the conversion process through the MJRC, which he was already eager to do. He had already, without realising it, been living as if he was a Jew for a number of years before converting. His wife and children joined him in the conversion process.

Baruch does not consider conversion as normative or that the involvement of Messianic Gentiles in Messianic Judaism is limited to those who convert. The congregation he leads observes some differences in ceremony and liturgy between MG's and MJ's.

## **C. Chava – Becoming a "Messianic proselyte" at time of Marriage**

When Chava married Shimon, a Messianic Jew, they added a section to their ceremony that welcomed Chava into the Jewish community. This was important to them for the sake of future children so they would have a clear and unambiguous identity as Jews. This has had the affect hoped for, and their children are very clear about their Jewish identity.

The wedding took place as a New Covenant wedding liturgy, with an optional ceremony whereby a non-Jewish bride of a Jewish groom may become a proselyte to Israel following the example of Ruth.

In the marriage ceremony Chava expressed her desire and intention not only to marry Shimon but also “to join the nation of Israel covenantally as a Messianic proselyte.” She saw this also as a marriage of sort, an irreversible covenant linking her destiny to the people of Israel. She joined herself publicly to Israel physically as well as spiritually, in a connection and commitment independent of her ‘personal salvation’.

Chava understood that as a believer in Yeshua she was already grafted into and the recipient of all the benefits of the covenant which God made with our father Abraham. Joining Israel as a “Messianic proselyte” in addition involved taking on for herself all the obligations of God’s covenant with Israel as well. She realised she did not need to become a “Messianic proselyte” in order to marry Shimon, but felt called by God to join herself to Israel in this special way. She had already received the God of Israel through the Messiah Yeshua. Now she chose to join herself in covenant to the people of Israel following the example of Ruth the Moabite.

Shimon, as a representative of Israel, and as her husband to be, accepted Chava ‘into the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, and stated that their act of marriage would be seen as a sealing of the covenant she was also making with the people of Israel.

#### **D. Sarah – Conversion for all Gentiles<sup>62</sup>**

Sarah was brought up in the traditional Church and at the age of 20 became personally committed to God. She left and for the next 25 years participated in various evangelical churches. During that time she became increasingly dissatisfied with Christianity and started investigating the Jewish roots of her faith. After what seemed a long journey of some 10 years, she discovered Messianic Judaism.

She joined a Messianic congregation, for several years thinking of herself as a non-Jew practising Messianic Judaism. As a result of research by the Rabbis in her movement it became clear that the way ahead for those who were not born Jewish was conversion.<sup>63</sup> When a conversion course was introduced, she felt a

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<sup>62</sup> Sarah’s story, “From Christianity to Judaism”, n.p., cited 10 May 2013, online: <http://www.ubmsonline.org/category/testimonies/#.UfDzMj6biLF>.

<sup>63</sup> This group advocates all non-Jews should convert – see below.

sense of relief that at last she would be able to call herself what she was already living out, as she was keeping Shabbat, the Festivals and High Holy Days, biblical kosher<sup>64</sup> etc. In 2010, after completing the course, she went through the mikveh and became a convert to Messianic Judaism. Since her conversion she believes her relationship with God has improved, her prayer life has changed completely and her life is more exciting.

#### 4. Instruction programs

##### 1. Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC)

The MJRC Conversion Process is a 16 page document detailing the motivations for those seeking conversion, the process of preliminary qualification, application, sponsorship, education, examination and approval, conversion ceremony, with the appropriate educational guidelines and syllabus required for the study program, and the application forms for applicant and sponsor to be completed and submitted to the Beth Din.<sup>65</sup>

For conversion under the MJRC process, the “fundamental motive for conversion should be *ahavat Yisrael*, the love of the people of Israel” combined with “a corresponding love for the Torah as God’s particular gift to the Jewish people.”

The applicant for conversion should see both the written Torah and the oral Torah (i.e., the living Jewish tradition of interpretation and application of the written Torah), understood in light of Yeshua’s teaching and redemptive work, as his/her guide for life.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst all Christians should possess a measure of such love, the type of *ahavat Yisrael* that leads to conversion is one that “so identifies with actual Jews, and with Israel’s journey through history, that it results in a person experiencing a change in their sense of self.

They seek conversion because they now already see themselves as part of the Jewish people, and could not conceive of their individual or family identity apart from their involvement with the Jewish people.

This love of the Jewish people must be tied to a corresponding love for the Torah as God’s particular gift to the Jewish people. The applicant for conversion should see both the written Torah and the oral Torah (i.e., the living Jewish tradition of interpretation and application of the written Torah), understood in light of Yeshua’s teaching and redemptive work, as his/her guide for life. At the same time, the applicant’s appreciation for

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<sup>64</sup> Not eating pork or shellfish, but mixing milk and meat. See Harvey, *Mapping*, 203-208, for this common but anomalous practice in the Messianic movement.

<sup>65</sup> MJRC Conversion Process, (Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, West Haven, Connecticut, 2008 ). See Appendix 1. (obtain permission).

<sup>66</sup> MJRC Conversion Process Pack, 2.

the Torah should not be abstract, separable from his/her love for the concrete reality of Jewish life. While love for the Torah may be adequate motivation for conversion within Orthodox Judaism, in Messianic Judaism we must be especially concerned that love for Jewish things never be divorced from love of Jewish people.<sup>67</sup>

The MJRC imposes strict guidelines and caveats on the conversion of non-Jews.

*How does the MJRC interpret and apply the New Testament teaching on the conversion to full membership in the Jewish people?*

The MJRC acknowledges that New Testament halakhah includes a general prohibition of conversion to full membership in the Jewish people for followers of Yeshua (Galatians 5:2; 1 Corinthians 7:17-20). We believe that this general prohibition is still applicable in the 21st century, and is intended not only to preserve the purity of Yeshua-faith but also to guard the integrity of Jewish communal life. However, halakhic prohibitions are not universal and unqualified. There are exceptional cases (e.g., intermarriage; Jewish ancestry; extraordinary vocation) where the general rule does not apply. The MJRC only sanctions conversion in such exceptional cases.

*How may one apply for conversion through the MJRC?*

In order to qualify as an applicant under the auspices of the MJRC an applicant must be an individual who is actively affiliated with a Messianic Jewish synagogue whose leader(s) is a member of the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), or who is actively affiliated with a Messianic Jewish congregation which adheres to MJRC standards, and who is sponsored by a member of the MJRC. It is also required that the leadership will recognize the MJRC conversion process in writing.<sup>68</sup>

## **2. Ruth II Process in the Tikkun Network**

Daniel Juster, a leading Messianic Jew who oversees the Tikkun Network of Messianic Congregations worldwide, opposes 'conversion' but advocates what he calls a "Ruth II Commitment". Recognising that some Gentiles wish to make a life-time commitment to the Jewish people and the Messianic movement he asks:

What about Gentiles who believe they are called for a life-time to live their life with and before the Jewish people. They are committed to live in the context of the Messianic Jewish community and the larger Jewish

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<sup>67</sup> MJRC conversion process page 2.

<sup>68</sup> <http://ourrabbis.org/main/faqs-mainmenu-25>

community for good. This seems to establish a different category of commitment and covenant. What should be done?<sup>69</sup>

Whilst leaving 'a small crack open in the doorway to conversion' Juster prefers the option of a "Ruth II Commitment" where a non-Jew who senses a life-time call to the Jewish people and to be part of the Messianic movement is able to affirm themselves as a Gentile who has committed themselves to the Jewish people.

Some have taken us beyond the above to conversion. I think conversion is a dangerous matter and have written this before. It could be misunderstood by the larger Body of Believers, [and] would be the desire of so many gentiles for the wrong reasons. It does not seem to be necessary since a special Ruth inclusion would be a part way step that would be adequate. I do understand [the need for] clarifying identity for those with Jewish grandparents who desire to clarify their place as Jews. I would think that for those of us that believe in restoration, that any move to conversion would have to be very carefully done with very strong standards. Major halakhic direction should come out of the restored apostolic and prophetic leadership in our movement. We are believing for more such leadership to be restored. There needs to be strong prophetic confirmation for such a move. So I leave small open crack in the doorway to conversion. However, I also note that most gentiles in our midst are just called to be gentiles or to enter Ruth II professions and still identity as Ruth II gentiles where the oneness of Jew and gentile is still reflected. At this point, however, the Jews are their people.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, at this time, Juster opposes 'conversion', arguing that:

Unless we oppose conversion, we will go down the slippery slope since there is no accepted halakha in the movement to define legitimate and illegitimate conversions.<sup>71</sup>

The problems with a conversion process are both theological and social:

Some think that these folks should be converted. They simply go through a conversion process and call themselves Jews. However there is nothing in the New Covenant Scriptures to support this and much to discourage it. In addition, to convert under traditional Judaism without hiding the truth of one's beliefs is rare. Is this honest? There have been exceptions. In

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<sup>69</sup> Daniel C. Juster, "Joining Israel Without Becoming a Jew", n.p., [cited 30 September 2014]. Online: <http://www.tikkunamerica.org/resources/JoiningIsraelWithoutBecomingAJew.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Juster, email correspondence with author, May 2013.

addition, a Messianic Jewish conversion will not be accepted in the larger Jewish community.

Juster's solution "is a calling and life commitment to live within and before the Jewish community and within a Messianic Community for life". Such a person should

...undergo a process of education and discipleship in this calling and then make a covenant commitment that is explicit. Gentiles in the Bible are never said to become Jews, but we do see Gentiles who joined Israel. When such a covenant commitment takes place the status of the Gentile changes.<sup>72</sup>

For such a person there would still be a few traditions that were 'off limits', such as wearing the tallit and circumcision, which would be optional but not required.<sup>73</sup> If such a person marries a Jew their children will be considered Jewish and the family will be embraced as a Jewish family.

What of the children of such a marriage? The Jewish community will not recognize as Jewish the child of a Jewish father except in Reform Judaism and if the person believes in Yeshua, this status in Reform will be questioned or rejected. However, in the Messianic community such children are fully embraced as Jewish. In addition, the status of one born of a Jewish mother who believes in Yeshua will not be accepted as Jewish by most. The one who is born of a Jewish mother and who comes to faith in Yeshua is also not required to be accepted by Israel for citizenship, but this is now being seriously addressed again in Israel. So in general people in such questioned categories will have to be accept the declaration of the Messianic community as to their status.<sup>74</sup>

The formal commitment a person makes under this arrangement is:

*I come before you today after serious examination of myself and examination by others. It is my conviction that I am called to live my life with and before the Jewish people. I therefore profess to live as part of the Jewish people. Though I am not a Jew, I come to take up a life that is a reflection of the promise that the Gentile among you shall be as a Jew. I say to the Jewish nation, your people shall be my people and your God my God.<sup>75</sup>*

Whilst Juster claims that the Ruth II process stops short of being a 'conversion' process, it formalises the commitment of a Gentile to live as a Jew as much as

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<sup>72</sup> See appendix 2 for Mentored Process and Covenant Ceremony

<sup>73</sup> Juster, "Joining": "Though circumcision is not required for this commitment, I do believe that when a man marries a Jewish woman and will produce with her children considered Jewish and a family considered Jewish, before marriage to a Jew, he should be circumcised. "

<sup>74</sup> Juster, "Joining", 3.

<sup>75</sup> Juster, "Joining", 3.

possible. Without sufficient Halachic authority in the Messianic movement thought Batei Din and able to define the status of such a person as a Jew, Juster's stop-gap solution attempts to bridge the gap between a full-orbed and definitive conversion process, and refusing the would-be "Messianic proselyte" a recognition of their altered status.

### **3. Messianic Proselyte – Michael Rudolph**

Similarly Michael Rudolph has also developed a way for a non-Jew to identify with the people of Israel, without formally declaring that they are Jewish.<sup>76</sup>

### **4. Union of British Messianic Jewish Congregations (UBMJC)**

This group advocates conversion of all Gentiles, arguing that it is divisive to maintain a distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Body of Believers. The group, whilst having some connection to other Messianic Jewish groups (originally sponsored by an offshoot of the IAMCS), practices a form of Messianic Judaism the majority of its leaders and participants are non-Jews who have converted to their own form of Messianic Judaism under their own self-constituted Beth Din. This raises particular problems and questions for the other streams of the Messianic movement.

The leader of one of the congregations in this group, Binyamin Sheldrake, is very much in favour of conversion of Gentiles, arguing that:

In essence it comes down to the Olive Tree theology of Rom 11. There is only one tree not two and it is a Jewish tree. God does not have 2 peoples divided by ethnicity or race. Avraham was not born Jewish and faith saved him and he became the father of all Jews, either by descent or ingrafting by faith. Avraham teaches us that faith is the way for anyone whether born Jewish or not. From him came the Jewish people, plus many others who converted down the ages and joined him in faith.<sup>77</sup>

Sheldrake does not wish to see the body of believers in Jesus

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Rudolph, "Proselytes to Israel in a Messianic Jewish Congregation," unpublished paper, 6 August 1988; "Intermarriage, Proselytes and The Next Generation In Messianic Jewish Congregations," unpublished paper, 3 March 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Questionnaire response, (quoted with permission) from Rabbi Binyamin Sheldrake, Adat Yeshua Messianic Synagogue/ Union of British Messianic Synagogues. [cited 20 June 2013]. See also: Binyamin Sheldrake, "Are You Being Called to Jewish Identity?" [cited 10 June 2013], online: <http://www.ubmsonline.org/home/congregations/teshuvah/conversion/#.UbBo2Pabg3w>.

divided into ethnic, racial groups that simply cannot exist. Despite the rhetoric and well-meaning theology, those who are not born Jewish will always feel, sense themselves to be inferior to those born Jewish if this kind of racial divide is maintained.<sup>78</sup>

The conversion program takes at least a year, following a course in which assignments are written, Hebrew is learned, and those wanting to convert for the 'wrong reasons' are excluded. The majority of people in this group, composed of four congregations in the UK, have been through such a conversion process.

Some have Jewish backgrounds but would not be considered to be halachically Jewish by any other Jewish body, some have converted from Islam, some from Catholicism, some from evangelical churches. The reason for all of them is the same: a revelation that it is a revived form of Judaism with Yeshua at its heart that is the way forward for the salvation of our people. The prophetic ingathering of the nations to the God of Israel and His Messiah represents the 'proof' for Jewish people that Yeshua is indeed the Messiah.<sup>79</sup>

Conversion is thus central to the life of the congregation:

I would say that it fairly central. Judaism has always welcomed converts (more or less down the ages) and so do we. Judaism is, should be, an outreach faith, taking the Great Commission seriously. We do, and seek converts to Yeshua, to the faith that He taught which was and is Judaism, His Judaism, and not later forms of it. We have begun to develop programmes to actively reach out to not only our own Jewish community but also to the 'nation' around us, especially to the non-British community where we are having some success.<sup>80</sup>

It is clear that this approach is different from the minority cautious and conservative approach of others within the Messianic movement, and from the majority who do not practice conversion and are opposed to it. Sheldrake believes that all Gentiles should convert to this form of Messianic Judaism, but it is not connected to the other streams of the Messianic movement. In order to locate these different approaches across the spectrum of the Messianic movement and its different streams, we now turn to the questionnaire and evaluate the responses received.

#### **4. Questionnaire Analysis**

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

More than 500 questionnaires were sent by email to leaders of Messianic congregations and organisations worldwide between January and June 2013.<sup>81</sup> Leaders were identified through listings of congregational organisations, other organisations such as the Messianic Times and theological institutions, and personal contacts of the author. 59 individual responses were received, in addition to statements from organisations. They either answered the questions posed or gave shorter personal statements of positions held. As expected, due to the controversial and sensitive nature of the subject, a majority did not respond and several expressed their concern at such a project.<sup>82</sup> Concerns were also raised that the paper would give undue emphasis to one particular position, generally perceived to be the opposing view to that held by the respondent. However, of the 59 responses received, a full range of positions was expressed.<sup>83</sup>

Seven respondents were women and ten were identified as young/emerging leaders. Six respondents were not Jewish but involved in leadership of Messianic groups and organisations without any conversion process. Three respondents had themselves undergone a conversion process. More than twenty respondents requested anonymity, so all responses are quoted anonymously (as numbered) or names have been changed, unless material previously published is used, or specific permission has been given.

Our analysis only reflects the responses received and does not claim to be proportionate or quantitative, or reflect all the contours and composition of the Messianic movement as a whole. It is generally assumed that 90% of UMJC member congregations and 100% of MJAA congregations are against a conversion process. In Israel the majority with only a few exceptions are against conversion process.

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<sup>81</sup> For Questionnaire and instructions see Appendix 3.

<sup>82</sup> "You will know that this is definite non-issue in Israel. Conversion to Messianic Judaism presupposes a level of organization and structure that is not present in the Israeli MJ movement at this time. The very notion of "conversion to Messianic Judaism" would raise the hackles of most of the congregational leadership in the country. Given the theological leanings of the community here, it is an untenable concept" (Respondent 28). As little previous research had been conducted on this topic, several of the participants in the questionnaire raise the issue of the sensitivity of the subject. Due to the lack of consensus within the Messianic movement on this subject, and the way discussion of the topic would be perceived within the wider Jewish and Christian communities, where it might be used to criticise the Messianic movement. Whilst it is inevitable that such possible mis-use of this research is possible, it has been conducted with the intention of helping to clarify some of the issues involved whilst critically discussing them, without proposing a particular position or approach. Through such as discussion a more reasoned assessment of the issues can be made, which will hopefully generate more light and less heat in what is already a controversial but as yet still under-researched area in Jewish studies.

<sup>83</sup> 27 USA 1 Brazil 1 Germany 4 Holland 19 Israel 8 UK responses received (1 July 2013).

Results for the Questionnaire are tabulated as follows:

1. *Do you have your own personal policy/views on conversion of non-Jews to Messianic Judaism? Yes/No (if Yes, please give details and/or attach your response)*

Opposed to MJC	39 (66%) <sup>84</sup>
An option not necessary or recommended	2 (3%)
MJRC conversion	13 (22%)
Another form of MJC	5 (9%)
Total	59

Observation. This finding shows the disproportionately higher expression of MJRC views, which are approximately 10% of the UMJC and probably less than 5% of the wider movement.

2. *Does your congregation/organisation have a policy on conversion of non-Jews to Messianic Judaism? Yes/No (if yes, please give details and/attach your response)*

Yes – 25 (42%)  
No – 34 (58%)

Observation – the issue is not significant for most of the respondents.

3. *To what extent are you in favour of a conversion process for non-Jews who believe in Yeshua as Messiah and wish to become (Messianic) Jews? (1= very little, not at all – 5 = very much, definitely). Please give your reasons for your choice:*

The question was posed thus to engage the respondents in critical reflection. Many chose not to give an extent, but to give their reasons. Less than 50% gave a response. These were

1 = 18; 2=2; 3=1, 4 = 2; 5 = 6

1. Against MJC in all circumstances – heretical and judaising, against 1 Cor .7 (A)	20 (40%)
2. Against MJC, but some exceptional circumstances might be accepted, recognising those converted elsewhere (B) <sup>85</sup>	17 (29%)
3. In favour of an alternative way of including Gentiles in the Messianic movement (C)	3 (5%)

<sup>84</sup> Two respondents prefer conversion to other Judaisms.

<sup>85</sup> “Some freedom permitted”; “We cannot limit God”; “Some exceptions might be possible.”

a. Ruth II (Juster, Tikun Ministries) and “Messianic Proselyte” (Rudolph) – disputed Jewish ancestry, marriage and children; special calling	
4. In favour of MJC in exceptional circumstances (ancestry; marriage; special calling) (D)	16 (27%)
a. MJRC (D1)	15
b. Individual unregulated conversions (D2)	1
5. In favour of all Gentiles becoming Jews – no ethnic distinctions in body of Christ (E)	2 (3%)
6. Against MJC as inauthentic, better conversion to other forms of Judaism (Elhanan) (F)	1 (2%)

4. *To what extent are you against a conversion process for non-Jews who believe in Yeshua as Messiah to become (Messianic) Jews? (1= very little, not at all – 5 = very much, definitely). Please give your reasons for your choice.*

Responses reflected the previous question and the question aimed to check understanding.

5. *If conversion to Messianic Judaism can take place under certain conditions or in exceptional circumstances, what would they be?*

Varies reasons and circumstances were given by 90% of respondents, particularly family reasons, disputed ancestry, exceptional call to identify with the Jewish people.

6. *Do you have any members of your congregation/organisation who have undergone a process of conversion to Messianic Judaism? If yes, what proportion/number of your congregation are in this group?*

90% – none

Others – small, 1, 5%, 10%, majority

7. *Please give brief details of their background, circumstances and reasons for conversion (whilst preserving anonymity)*

Examples given in 25% of responses.

8. *Would they be interested in completing a survey to add to this research? If so, please could you give contact details, or forward this email.*

Some received and responded to the forwarded questionnaire.

9. *To what extent is the issue of conversion significant in the life and activities of you congregation/organisation– please give illustrations/examples*

Examples given

*10. What further comments or questions about conversion to Messianic Judaism would you like to see addressed in this paper?*

Several respondents pointed out the special cases in their own area – especially Israel and Holland.

## 5. Conclusion

Conversion of non-Jews to Messianic Judaism remains a minority option, although it has generated significant controversy. As in the Jewish community in general, the numbers of converts are proportionately very low.<sup>86</sup> Apart from one particular group, it would appear that the Messianic movement does not encourage conversion, and if it occurs, will do so within a moderated and supervised process, under a competent Messianic Jewish Rabbinic authority. Yet questions remain. Is it really possible to “join Israel without becoming a Jew?” (Juster). Whilst converts see themselves as becoming Jews, non-Messianic Jews do not accept them as such, except in a very small number of cases.<sup>87</sup> Are the

It is clear that further research is needed, both on the nature of Messianic Judaism, and on the issue of conversion, as it points to the tensions and fault-lines within the movement. Within the UMJC, there is evidence of an ongoing respectful conversation on the subject.<sup>88</sup> Whilst agreeing to hold differences in tension, the majority hold to a position of ‘NIMBY - Not in my back yard’. Conversion is not to be encouraged or practiced, but is not rejected when it does occur. The majority decision of the UMJC not to perform or recognise conversions to Messianic Judaism whilst keeping in membership a growing minority group, the MJRC, who do practice conversions, appears a de facto recognition of those conversions, but at a distance. The UMJC recognises the rabbinical ordination of one of the MJRC converts, and accepts them as a

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<sup>86</sup> The figure of 2% is given in the 2013 Pew Forum “Portrait of Jewish Americans”, 65. Online: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>. “2% of Jews had no such background but indicate they had a formal conversion to Judaism, while 1% did not formally convert.”

<sup>87</sup> Anecdotal evidence has been supplied but not corroborated of a Messianic Jewish conversion certificate being accepted for purposes of *Aliya* and Israeli citizenship.

<sup>88</sup> See Sean Emslie’s collection of articles and blogs continuing discussion of the UMJC position: <http://towardblog.wordpress.com/category/messianic-jewish-conversion/> and <http://towardblog.wordpress.com/2005/01/11/analysis-of-the-umjc-conversion-position-paper-the-majority-position/>

congregational leader and their congregation as having membership within the UMJC.

Within the MJAA, there is a clear policy on the non-acceptance or practice of conversion. In Israel the overwhelming majority of congregations do not accept or see the need for conversion, although there are some exceptional cases. In the UK, conversion to Messianic Judaism is not accepted, except for one group composed of gentile converts to Messianic Judaism, who advocate that all non-Jews should both accept Yeshua as Messiah and convert to their own form of Judaism, which does not recognise other Judaisms, whether mainstream Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Liberal, or the other Messianic streams.

Dan Cohn Sherbok concludes:

When Reform Judaism emerged in the 19th century, Reform conversion was condemned by the Orthodox. Today, Reform converts continue to be regarded as Gentiles by Orthodox Jews. In Israel, Orthodox rabbis press for a change in the Law of Return so that non-Orthodox converts will not be permitted to settle in the Holy Land. This situation has not affected Reform Judaism's attitude towards conversion, nor should such attitudes deter Messianic Jews from converting the faithful. Jewish identity should be available to all those who genuinely desire to become Jewish, including those who regard Yeshua as their Saviour.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "On Messianic Conversion" in Sparks, Andrew (ed.). *Keshet: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*. Issue 19 - Summer 2005. Online: [http://www.keshetjournal.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=30:on-messianic-conversion&catid=19:issue-19&Itemid=421](http://www.keshetjournal.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30:on-messianic-conversion&catid=19:issue-19&Itemid=421).

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